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BJORNSTJERNE BJORNSON.

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.

"It is my calling to question, not to answer," Henrik Ibsen, that sick soul, said when called on to solve one of the innumerable problems he had stripped bare and flung out for society to struggle with. No situation, no relation, no creed, no custom, no convention passed under review of his sharp, small eyes, but he forthwith tapped with his knuckle, and the bitter smile of his close-compressed lips bears witness how often the sound he evoked rung hollow. Not so to his great contemporary and compatriot Björnson did the world disclose its inner nature. His vision had a narrower range, his heart was warmer, his nature more compliant. Between these two great writers one may see the differences that sever the thinker who suffers the woes of all humanity and becomes the tongue of the world and the ages, and the man who, living closely knit to his immediate surroundings, striking root deep down into the soil of his own land, becomes the incarnate expression and the idol of his nation and his day. Ibsen might stand as an embodiment of the nineteenth century with its iconoclastic forces, its restless probings and questionings, its haughty refusal to trust appearances, take facts on faith or interpretations on tradition. Yes, even the embittered humility of his refusal to answer questions is an expression akin to the century's unabashed agnosticism. Never before has man had the lowliness of his place in the universe rubbed so thoroughly into his consciousness.

If the more striking movements of the nineteenth century touched Björnson it was late in life and after travel and study. Like Robert Browning, he was born a physical optimist. "Strong as the beast of prey whose name twice occurs in his," writes a friend, "he looms up majestically in my mind with his massive

head, his firmly compressed lips and his sharp, penetrating gaze from behind his spectacles." With his fine endowment of physique it is impossible to know how much of his faith in man and life was due to his robust circulation, his eupeptic constitution.

That Norway, like other provincial places that lie somewhat aside from the great currents of life, has its own method of persecution we may guess from Björnson's description of the ways of its small towns:

"The inhabitants are very orderly—not from fear of the police, for, as a rule, there is none—but from fear of being talked about, as everybody is known to everybody else. If you go down the street you must raise your hat at almost every window, and there is usually an old lady sitting there to return your bow. Further, you must greet every one you meet; for all these quiet people go about reflecting as to what is fitting for the world in general and themselves in particular. Whoever oversteps the bounds prescribed by his rank or calling loses his good name; for his father and his grandfather, too, are known as well as he is himself, and every leaning toward the unseemly which has previously displayed itself in the family is brought to light."

This atmosphere and the general hostility which exceptional abilities and unprecedented opinions awaken exiled Ibsen, we know, for a large part of his life from Norway. But Björnson was "ever a fighter." He was stout-hearted and cheerfully ready for any opposition and hostility that offered, and, indeed, provoked a good deal of it. At one time, when matters seemed about at their worst for him, it was reported in the daily press that he was to leave Norway. His answer, through the same medium, was prompt and emphatic: "I shall stay right here in Norway; I shall win or lose in Norway; I shall thrash or get thrashed in Norway."

Kvikne,—where this great bear of the North was born, December 8th, 1832, just four years after the birth of Ibsen,—Kvikne, in that cheerless, bare, ice-bound region where no crops ever ripened, had with all its disadvantages wherewithal to harden and to strengthen, and something of the Norwegian's boldness and naïveté may have come to him through the very barrenness and austere grandeur of those great peaks that hemmed in the vision of his first six years. In his charming little sketch "Blakken" we get a vivid picture of the place and the memories of it that lasted with the author to manhood. The coming of winter there, far up on the mountainside in the Dövre Chain, was sorrowfully

early. Nor could the summer be relied upon. The good pastor who was Björnson's father sowed a field with grain one warm and early spring, only to find it buried deep in snow the following day. The mown hay was in constant danger of snow-storms, and then when finally winter came "the cold was so great," he writes, "that I dared not take hold of the latch of the street door lest my fingers should freeze fast to the iron." The pastor, who was born in the region and well acclimated, was, nevertheless, obliged to wear a mask over his face when he drove to his sub-parish. Snow often lay on a level with the second-story windows, while the smaller outhouses were frequently buried for weeks at a time. The author, writing in 1872, looks back and remembers how he used to stand on a table looking out over the vast stretch of glittering snow in which hills, shrubberies and fences were smoothed away and only the tops of the tall birch-trees fluttered over the smooth surface; or else from the same elevated post he watched this white sea lashed by winds into billowy undulations, the snow-shoe runners faring down the glittering hillside, or the little Laps, looking hardly more than balls of fur, in sleighs drawn by reindeer come whizzing down the mountains and up the slope. It was at that time a remote and dangerous part of the country, and the priest went to and from divine service armed. Indeed, the incumbent who preceded Björnson's father fled the country and the charge had gone unpastored for some years. The ways of the land may be judged by one of the author's earliest recollections:

"I still remember distinctly how, one Saturday morning, I was in the act of creeping up-stairs to the study, because there was a coating of ice on the steps after scrubbing, and had not proceeded very far when a crash and a din from the study drove me down again in terror. For one of the champions of the parish had undertaken up there to teach the refractory priest the ways of the people and found to his dismay that the priest was resolved to teach him his own first. He made his exit from the door in such a manner that he came tumbling all the way down to the bottom of the stairs, and then gathering himself up, he reached the street door in four bounds."

These childish recollections throw a certain light upon the scenes of violence sown throughout Björnson's novels. One is constantly brought up standing by blows, fisticuffs; forms of savage brutality which a more sophisticated civilization carries out in refinements of coldness, reserve or sarcasm.

Later on, somewhere about the poet's sixth year, his father was called to Naëssset in the Romsdal Valley. Here we find the controlling influence of Björnson's life and work; here he discovered the element which afterwards became the distinguishing mark, the chief feature of his art—the beauty of his land. He lived amidst the very stuff of his work. That the first impression was deep we may judge from his description of his earliest experiences there:

“Here at the Naëssset parsonage, one of the finest gards in the country, lying broadbreasted between the two arms of the fjord, with green mountains above and cataracts and gards on the opposite shore, with undulating fields and eager life in the heart of the valley, and out along the fjords, mountains, from which naze after naze with a large gard on each, project out into the water—here at Naëssset parsonage, where I could stand of evenings and watch the play of the sun over mountain and fjord until I wept as if I had done something wrong; and where on my show-shoes, down in some valley or other, I could suddenly pause, as one spellbound by a beauty, a yearning, which I was powerless to explain, but which was so great that I felt the most exalted joy as well as the most oppressive sense of imprisonment and grief; here at Naëssset my impressions grew.”

In reading Björnson's work as a whole it comes upon one how profoundly the type of the environment worked upon his creation, compact as it is of almost savage strength, utter tenderness and the naïveté which belongs to those who have spent their youth apart, in loneliness.

Björnson's life, were it to be told in detail, offers more of incident and activity than that of most men of letters, for the enforced isolation of his early childhood made him apparently the more eager to mix with his kind later on, and he was as much a patriot as a poet. Indeed, one of his critics says that to utter his name is equal to hoisting the Norwegian flag. At an early age, sent to the Latin school in the little town of Molde, he organized societies among his mates, was a leader in games, but never distinguished as a student. He was, however, an omnivorous reader, devouring the old Norse *sagas*, folk-lore tales and folk *sagas* and the works of Wergeland, one of the first of the Northern writers to interest himself in the economic condition of the peasantry. From the Latin school at Molde Björnson progressed to the University of Christiania. He was at this time, it is said, and one can well believe it from later pictures, a youth of quite

extraordinary beauty, large, athletic and very fair, with unforgettable blue eyes, a great exuberance of spirits and a simplicity and naïveté which belonging to one so distinguished in appearance conveyed an impression of something akin to grandeur—as of one who could easily afford to be himself. At this time he wrote a drama called “*Valborg*,” which was accepted by the directors of the Theatre of Christiania but which the author himself withdrew before it was presented, preferring to wait and do something better. He threw himself with Ibsen enthusiastically into the fight to free the Norwegian theatre from Danish influences. His feeling about the whole matter reappears later on in that comic scene in which Signe, the fisher lass, presents herself to the Danish director of the theatre in Bergen, and to prove her fitness for a stage career mimics his wife.

In his own country Björnson is most widely known and loved as a poet, as a writer of those songs which a whole nation knows and loves and sings, songs like the national anthem:

“Yes, we love the land so rock-bound
Rising from the foam;”

Or like that song of the lofty mountains in Arne which retains an echo of its original yearning charm even in translation. To English readers he must of necessity, first and foremost, come as novelist. In his twenty-fifth year he published the first of a long series of pastoral studies, “*Synnöve Solbakken*.” It is difficult to say what economic conditions lay at the root of the sudden rise of the peasant in the poetic imagination of Europe just at this time. It is said that George Sand’s rustic stories were directly inspired by Auerbach’s “Black Forest Tales” and “On the Heights,” that wonderful combination of Spinoza’s “Ethics” and Immermann’s peasant drawings. It is fairly certain, however, that Björnson knew neither Walpurga nor *la petite* Fadette, and that “*Synnöve Solbakken*” is a picture drawn direct from his own youth gilded and lighted by the touch of memory in absence. The striking thing about the book is that, the work of a man just twenty-five, it yet bears no mark of immaturity, no bungling. Björnson with his natural naïveté and grand simplicity did not even make the usual encouraging blunder of youth, that of trying his hand upon a canvas too large for him to manage. A series of simple pictures of life, of the happy religious folk who lived on the sunny hill and the somewhat less

consecrated family of little Thorbjörn who lived in the shade where the sun came only fitfully and the hay dried so slowly. The characters are given with the sure quick drawing of a master, delicately and always in low relief, without a touch too much, yet distinct and true. Greater always, however, than his figure-drawing is his landscape-painting, as perfect here in this first book as in the last. We get at once in a few lines the high spot on the mountain open on all sides, with the sun flooding it from early dawn to twilight; we see little Thorbjörn sent to tend the herds on the mountain, sitting on the stone with the cattle about him, listening to the church bells as they rise from the valley and mingle with the tinkle of the sheep-bells. We can follow him as he walked at night when the rest were well in bed to set out Synnöve's flowers through the forest stretching upward, now blue, now dark, now still darker toward the rocky waste, till it looked like a great sea of mist. Two tales are current of this book; the one that, appearing first in a periodical at Christiania, attracted so much attention that it was immediately published in book form, ran through ten editions quickly and was translated into French, English, German, Swedish, Dutch, Finnish, Russian and Spanish.

The other tale told by Boyeson is that after the book was published Björnson waited impatiently for the comment of his friends, but none of them read it. Finally he persuaded a friend to attack it on the promise of a bottle of punch as a reward. The friend lay down on the bed and began to read. Björnson sat down opposite, breathless with expectation. The leaves were turned one after another, but not a word was spoken. Finally the last page was turned, the friend arose, claimed his bottle of punch, lit his pipe, and as he was doing it the words softly escaped him: "Devil take me, if that isn't the best book I ever read in my life."

It is, indeed, perfect because so little was attempted. Björnson was as yet untouched by world problems, by questions of psychology or philosophy. The inarticulate peasant souls that he depicted, with their occasional outbreaks of savagery, of beating, fighting and drunkenness, with their narrow religious creed as a chief means of æsthetic expression, their violent dances and hard drinking as a sole form of diversion, were drawn with fine and tender sentiment, but were as yet untouched by tragedy. "Arne," written in 1858, repeated the success of "*Synnöve*." It is sown

throughout with charming songs, for Arne, like his creator, was a lyric poet. "The Happy Boy" followed in 1859 and is a third rustic idyl; the characters, Dr. Rasmus Anderson thinks, gaining in distinctness while the author's artlessness and simplicity of style remained untouched. It is, perhaps, not a fault that these peasant types fall at times so deep in their setting that one hardly distinguishes the man from the tree or the busy life on the gard from the aspects of the weather on the mountains. It is the Norwegian country the author is giving us; man as the product of the soil; and the art is the more perfect that when we finish reading one of these tales we know and love the land as much as the persons. And how dumb and instinctive are the little modest love tales that adorn the pages. Love comes to these shy souls as a capricious, mute visitant troubling the flesh, opening their eyes to beauty and their souls to music, saddening them only as preparation for an unspeakable and unspoken joy. It is the love of a simple folk who have fared hardly and lived in the open. There is nothing feverish or perverse or uncertain in it. The instinct is true and untrammelled, and we know of a surety that the right people will gravitate together, that Synnöve will put Thorbjörn to the test but will wait for him; that Arne will overcome the enmity of his father's foe and marry Eli, for whom he has for years been buying gifts to hide in the chest of the best chamber; that Oyvind will go up to Nordistuen and take Marit, for as he has said to her: "All unhappy love belongs to timid people, or weak people, or calculating people who keep waiting for some special opportunity, or cunning people who in the end smart for their own cunning, or to sensuous people that do not care enough for each other to forget rank and distinction."

The decade of Björnson's life from 1860 to 1870 was full of activity and work. He was for a time editor of a paper in Christiania; he contributed short stories and sketches such as "The Father," "The Eagle's Nest," to the periodicals; he became the director of a theatre. He travelled through Germany and Italy and spent two years in Rome, where he produced "*Sigurd Slembe*," an historical dramatic poem—a noble production full of fine rhetorical passages and still deep set in the Norwegian soil. A government pension of 1,000 thalers was then granted him; he revived a little comedy called "The Newly Married," published a poetic drama, "Mary Stuart," once again became di-

rector of a theatre, and in 1868 published "The Fisher Lass," to my mind the most perfect of his Norwegian idyls. At this point Björnson had gained complete control of his materials. His landscapes stand out, colored and vivid in a few sure strokes; a new sense has awakened in him that man is what he is by reason of his ancestry, and he begins the tale of the Fisher Lass with her grandparents on both sides. The girl's mind hampered at first in the little fishing village expands; she goes to Bergen and sees the theatre; she reads Shakespeare with the parson's daughter; she has an irresistible vocation and follows it. From this tale we may derive what a long intellectual journey through the realm of ideas Björnson made in a few years. From a narrow, hide-bound Protestant of the type now so frequently called muscular Christian, with all prejudices of the peasants themselves, with the shamefaced reserve of the hardy extreme north folk, the author here arrives at admitting that a woman may have an intellectual vocation and the right to follow it. To be sure, the man who has passionately loved the Fisher Lass, discovering that she has the artist temperament and a vocation, finds his love instantly quenched and he falls in love with the colorless pastor's daughter who has befriended the heroine. Björnson was willing to grant a woman's right to her life, her talents, her career, but it was beyond him at that period to realize that these might be for her as for a man compatible with a home, husband, children and the natural fulfilments of life.

The "Fisher Lass" is the last of the pastoral idyls; the last of those stories which have the same sort of haunting charm as Greig's melodies, a far-away melancholy, broken, irregular syn-copations and rhythms of a primitive and undeveloped people, the gentle falling cadences of *lité* but half awake and aware of itself.

At the point of his greatest celebrity and popularity Björnson did what only a strong man could do; instead of continuing in the vein which had won this success, he stopped writing and resumed his education. He read French, German, English literature, philosophy, science, all the modern periodicals, and when he began to produce again it was from a new point of view. His old world had vanished. Like all great men, he realized that life, however it began, could not end with himself, and having seen and learned more, he became a part of all he had absorbed, identi-

fied himself with all the life and thought he had reached. In the new period Björnson had new causes to fight for, the position of women, business ethics, standards of morality, the cruelties and superstitions of the old Jewish creed. In 1872 he published two plays, "The Editor" and "The Bankrupt." The first dealt with the abuses of the power of the press; the second with the ethics of business life. "The King" is a tragedy in which the king, who has Republican principles, renounces the throne and wishes to marry a woman of the people. "The New System" (1879) is a matter of the wasteful management of railways; "Leonarda" (1879), "A Glove" (1883), both deal with the double standard of morality for men and women; "Beyond Human Strength" (1883), with the question of miracles wrought by faith; "Geography and Love" (1885), a domestic comedy; "Laboremus" (1901), "At Storhöve," sum up his plays at this period. These were interspersed by tales and novels. "*Magnhild*" copes with woman's right to free herself of a husband when her moral development is hampered by him. The story, however, is indistinct and unconvincing. It has, indeed, some fine character-drawing and the old-time cunning at landscape-painting. But the *morale* of the book is a little odd. Skarlie the husband, while we are repeatedly told that he was a rascal, seems to be more than ordinarily blameless in his relations to his young and beautiful wife, so that when she decides to exchange him for America,—that haven and refuge in the dreams of all Björnson's people,—one's sympathies are uncertain. To be sure, she married him without love; that he got her as it were by cunning; but the average mortal learns to pay for stupidity and incompetence the same price that he pays for sin. To justify *Magnhild*, Skarlie should have been worse. Doubtless he was, but the author, absorbed in his women characters, forgot to paint him. He is only obscurely indicated. *Magnhild* herself lost her dream, her love, her career, but discovered in the end that all her small and casual efforts at goodness reaped unexpected harvests. "Dust" is a little tale strikingly told, dealing with the same thesis as the play "Beyond Human Strength," namely, the relation of the real world to the supernatural, both strongly recommending, even as Browning did, that in this life we confine ourselves to human means of betterment, since all tampering with the miraculous, the supernatural, is like to end in mistake, disease, catastrophe.

Björnson's ultimate theories of life he summed up in his two last long novels, "In God's Ways" and "The Heritage of the Kurts." "In God's Ways" begins with two boys in a typical fishing town on the Norwegian coast. Their talks, their games, their persecutions at school, are drawn to the life. Edward is an ordinary boy of alert mind not above meanness. Ole Tuft is a pious boy from the beginning; he reads the Bible to the poor, attends the sick and cherishes a secret plan which he hesitates to confide to Edward. "Surely it is not wicked?" asks Edward, with the normal outlook of a boy.

"No, it is not wicked," replies Ole. "It is rather something very grand, very grand and great. . . . In reality the grandest thing in the world. . . . I am going to be a missionary."

In this first chapter the two boys are set before us perfectly alive, with their whole fate implicit there. Edward, when Ole speaks of preparing for his coming grandeur, asks in good faith, "For the wild beasts and poisonous snakes?" But Ole is thinking of binding souls to a creed.

The latter parts of the book deal with the youth and manhood of these two boys. Ole Tuft marries Edward's rich sister and settles down into a rather fat, narrow-minded parson. He pays the price of success, for he is an eloquent preacher with an indolent body and a fettered mind. Edward studies natural science and becomes a famous surgeon. He falls in love with a lovely musician, Ragne, who is unhappily married to her deceased sister's husband. In this case Björnson leaves us in no doubt at all as to why and how Ragne is unhappy. Edward determines to free her from her misery and degradation. She is hopeless, faint-hearted, timid. He boldly schemes to ship her—once more to the ultimate haven—to America; in this case it is to Madison, Wisconsin,* to his friends, and when he has finished his studies and gotten his degree some years later he follows her. Just when and how he married her is untold, and the third part of the book opens with Edward's return with his wife to his native land to manage a sanitarium in the very town where his brother-in-law is pastor. To Ole Tuft, a divorced woman is a sinner.

* In Madison, Wisconsin, lived D. Rasmus B. Anderson who made the best English translations of Björnson's novels. It is one case where America may be proud of excelling England in craftsmanship. The books issued in England under the editorship of Mr. Edmund Gosse are ill printed, inaccurate and unpardonably careless in style.

His wife looked upon her as a questionable character and her jealousy was also aroused. The marriage comes upon them as a surprise and they are unprepared. Briefly Ragne, frail, tender, sensitive, is totally unfitted for this world and its inevitable hostilities. Even with all her husband's courage and tenderness she is unable to bear life and wilts, fades away and dies. Her husband, whose love for her is not one of the least beautiful things Björnson has depicted, is utterly heart-broken. Then the child of Ole Tuft and Edward's sister falls desperately ill. A dangerous operation is to be performed and no one can do it but Edward. His sister sends to beg him to come, and his fineness of character is well brought out in his prompt efficiency, the swiftness with which he sends to have the house made ready, the father and mother taken out of the way before he performs the operation. The child's life is saved and Edward departs as silently, as swiftly as he came. The sister is now bent upon reconciliation, but both she and her husband are refused admittance at Edward's door. She writes and begs forgiveness, and, without a word from her brother, receives in return the journal of Ragne kept in the last two years of her life, when the coldness, hostility and slanders of the community were slowly killing her. Then through many disasters some sort of peace is patched up, but the main thing is that Ole Tuft and his wife are converted to Edward's doctrine. Not a creed and a formula lead in "The Ways of God," but kindness and helpfulness, and Tuft comes to see, as most men do sooner or later, that neither the most hide-bound creed nor the utmost ingenuity of metaphysics can pardon the man who sows life with difficulties and suffering where he might have offered help and kindness.

"The Heritage of the Kurts," Björnson's last novel, is less perfect than "In God's Ways." He is handling a subject large and awkward, perhaps imperfectly assimilated, namely, heredity and our power to control it and the evils of a double standard of morals. There are times when the violent and vigorous inheritance of the Kurts, which he deals with for five or six generations, emerging in an enthusiastic and idealistic schoolmaster seems just a little funny. The schoolmaster founds a girls' school, and the parents are informed at the opening that the children are to be soundly instructed in all matters of physical morality, and that they are to be taught to exact from men precisely the same stand-

ards they practise themselves. The effect of this teaching on a Norwegian seaport town furnishes quite sufficient incident for the two-volume novel. As a work of art it is undoubtedly a *succès manqué*, but it is none the less a noble piece of work and a valuable contribution to modern progressive thought.

Viewed as a whole, Björnson's work falls into two distinct periods. The early period of pastoral idyls, perfect in kind, finished works of art. The second period in which he flung himself soul and body into the struggles of modern life, sacrificed his art and gave every energy to moral and religious reform. It may be said of him without hesitation or withholding that wherever there was a question of greater and less nobility he stood, magnificently brave, upon the higher side. There may arise questions as to the enduring value of his art, but never as to the enduring value of the man himself.

"How are the mighty fallen!" In a few short months such clarion voices as Swinburne's, Meredith's, Björnson's are all silenced:

"The year has lost its spring,"

as the old lyrist sang. But so long as the energy, courage and bold-faced truthfulness of such men as these echo throughout the world, so long as new voices carry on their message, the human spirit is not without refreshment.

LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.